
Women's Empowerment and Change in a Backward District of West Bengal A Post-Reform Analysis

Apurba Kumar Chattopadhyay & Kaberi Pal

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Abstract: In this article we have examined the impact of economic reforms on women's socio-economic standing or their empowerment in a backward district of West Bengal. Purulia is considered as the study area. It examines the changing status of women in the post reforms period in the study area in respect of education, work participation and health. The available secondary data have been used for this study. It has been found that the gender inequality as manifested in the literacy gap remained maximum throughout the period in Purulia. It has minimum literacy rate in West Bengal in 2011 where only about 50% of women are literate. In terms of work participation of women, we find that the marginalization of female work participation had been steepest in Purulia indicating worsening economic status of women. Finally, in terms of health status as reflected in terms body mass indices (BMI) of women, more than one third of them are malnourished in 2019-20. The status of women in Purulia thus remain as vulnerable as before in the post reforms period and all efforts in achieving the MDGs and SDGs pertaining to empowerment of women and gender equality have bypassed the backward region of the country.

Key words: Gender inequality, women empowerment, literacy, health, work participation, BMI.

1. Introduction

Women play an important role in development process. However, the sharp gender inequality is a persistent feature of the Indian society and it persists in many different forms. This leads to disparities in well-being as well as differences in power and decision-making. It is widely believed that the period after economic reforms has witnessed multifaceted changes in the socio-economic life of the Indian population. The importance of gender equality in enhancing human capability cannot be overemphasized. There exists large volume of literature showing how gender equality can foster economic development. Gender equality is also an important constituent of human development and women empowerment. Given the importance of gender equality in the human life, this study seeks to analyze the status of women during the post reforms period. Since status of women remains more vulnerable in the backward region vis-à-vis in the developed region, we have attempted to study the socio-economic status of women in a backward district of West Bengal. For our study, we have selected Purulia as a backward district of West Bengal.

The manifestation of gender inequality and lack of empowerment may be found in the access to education, health, and work participation. Further, it has been found that

the demographically backward regions of India tend to have greater inequality in gender relation. This is very much true for the north Indian states, particularly, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh (Dreze and Sen2002). It has also been found that even the states with higher level of per capita income such as Punjab and Haryana have higher child mortality rate and fertility rate than the corresponding averages for south Indian states. Dreze and Sen (2002) have inferred that this phenomenon may be the result of the comprehensive subordination of women in these two states. There have been many studies concerning status of women. The sex ratio in population is one important indicators of prevailing status of women in the society that is related with societal norms, customs, and aspirations (Chattopadhyay 2002). Researchers have found that the sex ratio of West Bengal has always appeared to be more averse to women than all India level (Banerjee and Mukherjee 2005). Further, declining juvenile sex ratio indicated failure of the policy makers to stop sex selective abortion of female fetuses in India despite laws against it and campaigns to promote goodwill towards girls (Chattopadhyay 2011, John 2011). The most important aspects which may give vital inputs regarding status of women are their education, work participation and health. On every aspect we would find gender inequality.

The United Nations (2000)set time bound targets related to human development with a deadline of 2015, which are known, as Millennium Development Goal (MDGs). Eradication of gender inequality and empowerment of women has been an important goal in the list of MDGs. Later, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also included achieving gender equity as a vital goal for human development.

In this paper, we have investigated the changing state of women empowerments in the post reforms period in Puruliain respect of education, work participation and health. We have compared the changes in our study area vis-à-vis changes occurring at the state level and at the national level. This paper is based on secondary data. It has been organized in five sections. After this introductory section we have analysed the status of women in respect of education, work participation and health in 2-4 sections and finally, in section 5 we make concluding observations.

2. Changing Status of Women in respect of Education:

Education is one of the most powerful weapons for social development that can move our society towards betterment and empowerment of the citizens. Especially women's education plays a significant role in improving society. Literacy is a tool, which can empower the women to fight against the inequalities and injustice in the society (Patel & Dighe, 1997).

2.1 Scenario at the National Level:

We have presented census data on literacy rate in India during the period 1981-2011 in Table-1. While the period 1981-91 represents pre-reforms period, the later period, viz., 1991-2011 constitutes post reforms period. Table-1 clearly shows that that female literacy rate is always lower than male literacy rate. From the table it is also clear that total literacy rate has increased from 43.57% (1981) to 74.04% (2011) and further to 77.70% in 2021, male literacy has increased from 56.38% (1981) to 84.70% (2021) and female literacy has increased from 29.76 % (1981) to 70.30% (2011).

Table-1: Literacy rate in India, 1981-2021

Year	Male	Female	Total	Gender gap
1981	56.38	29.76	43.57	26.62
1991	64.13	39.29	52.21	24.84
2001	75.26	53.67	64.83	21.59
2011	82.04	65.46	74.04	16.58
2021#	84.70	70.30	77.70	14.40

Source: *Census of India 1981-2011*. # Based on Census 2011, National Statistical Office (NSO) & National Family health Survey (NFHS-5). <https://www.findeasy.in/indian-states-by-literacy-rate/>

We also note that gender gap in literacy which is defined in terms of difference between male and female literacy rates was very high in the pre-reforms period which declined steadily in the post-reforms period. Thus, at the all-India level, the gender gap was as high as 26.62 percentage points in 1981, which declined to 16.58 percentage points in 2011 and further to 14.40 percentage points in 2021.

2.2. Women's Literacy Scenario at the Inter-state Level:

We have presented decadal changes in the women's literacy rate and gender gap during 1981-2021 in Table-2. The data concerns 15 major States in India. Kerala retained the top position during the entire period in literacy with least gender gap throughout the period. In 1981, the gender gap in Kerala was only 12 percentage points with male literacy rate at 85 percent and female literacy at 73 percent while at the national level the gender gap in literacy in 1981 was as large as 25 percentage points with male and female literacy rates 53 percent and 28 percent, respectively. The states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and even Tamil Nadu had a gender gap in literacy, which had been larger than the national level. On the other hand, apart from Kerala, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Karnataka had a gender gap of less than 25 percentage points.

Table-2: Decadal Change in the Women's Literacy and Gender Gap during 1981-2011 in 15 major States in India

Table-2: Decadal Change in the Women's Literacy and Gender Gap during 1981-2011 in 15 major States in India

State	Decadal Change (% points)				Gender Gap (M-F)				
	1981-91	1991-2001	2001-2011	2011-2021	1981	1991	2001	2011	
Andhra Pradesh	9	18	8.6	0.35	21	22	20	14	13.9
Assam	Na	13	11.3	14.93	Na	19	16	12	8.9
Bihar	7	11	19.3	9	28	29	26	20	19.2
Gujarat	12	10	11.7	5.12	25	24	22	17	14.7
Haryana	14	16	10.8	5.36	29	29	23	19	16.7
Karnataka	12	13	11.1	2.42	24	23	19	15	12.9
Kerala	13	5	1	3.13	12	8	3	4	2.2
Madhya Pradesh	11	21	10	6.26	28	29	27	21	15.7
Maharashtra	13	16	7.5	2.53	28	25	18	14	12.3
Orissa	11	16	13.4	6.29	29	28	25	18	13.7
Punjab	12	14	7.3	7.77	15	16	12	10	10
Rajasthan	7	24	8.7	5.48	29	35	32	28	23.2
Tamil Nadu	12	14	8.9	4.46	27	23	17	13	10
Uttar Pradesh	9	18	16.3	6.22	28	31	27	20	18.4
West Bengal	13	13	11.2	5.56	23	21	18	12	8.7
India	11	15	11.5	4.84	25	25	22	17	14.4

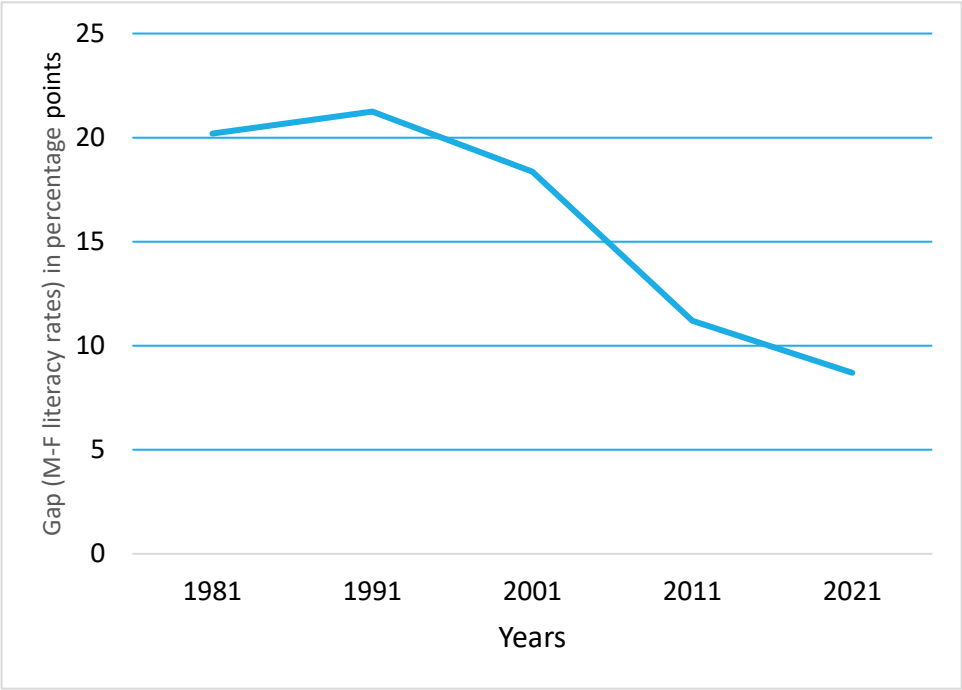
Source: Calculation based on Census of India 1981-2011 data and <https://www.findeasy.in/indian-states-by-literacy-rate/>

Note: Assam was excluded in Census 1981.

From the available data in Table-2 we may argue that in almost all major states women's literacy increased significantly in the post reforms period; particularly during 1991-2001, followed by during 2001-2011. Only Kerala witnessed significant increase in the female literacy in the 1981-1991 decade. From the table it is evident that the gender gap in women's literacy over 1981-2021 is steadily declining indicating improvement in women's status in respect of literacy. Interestingly, it may be noted that in Kerala, gender gap has increased marginally during 2001-2011 since the decadal increase in male literacy was greater than the decadal increase in female literacy. However, the gap declined thereafter and in 2021, it is the lowest at 2.2 percentage points among all the major states in India. While the states like West Bengal and Assam have gender gaps in literacy less than 10 percentage points in 2021, Rajasthan, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh still have this gap more than 15 percentage points with Rajasthan having an alarming level of gap of more than 23 percentage points.

It may be noted that the gender gap in literacy in West Bengal is steadily decreasing in the post reforms period after increasing slightly during 1981-91. The significant decline in the gender gap has been experienced in the post-reform period and more marked during 2001-2021 (**Figure-1**).

Figure 1: Declining Gender gap in Literacy in West Bengal during 1981-2021



Source: as in Table-2

2.3. Women’s Literacy Trend in the districts of West Bengal:

It may be noted that overall, women literacy rates have been increasing but at decreasing rates over the decades (Table-3). In almost all districts women’s literacy increased significantly in the post reforms period; particularly during 1991-2001, followed by during 2001-2011. Only Bardhaman, South 24 Paraganas and Medinipur districts witnessed impressive increase in the female literacy rates in the pre-reforms period during 1981-1991. Further, there has been steady decline in the literacy gap over the time in all the districts of West Bengal except in Maldah where there has been marginal increase in the gender gap during 2001-2011.

Table-3: District wise Decadal Change in the Women’s Literacy and Gender Gap during 1981-2011 in West Bengal

Women's Empowerment and Change

District	Decadal Change (% points)			Gender Gap (M-F)			
	1981-1991	1991-2001	2001-2011	1981	1991	2001	2011
Darjiling	15.4	16.12	9.38	19.2	19.3	17.36	12.31
Jalpaiguri	12.8	19.7	13.39	18.1	22.8	20.74	13.66
Koch Bihar	14	23.74	11.55	20.7	24.1	19.79	12.12
Uttar Dinajpur	5.8	14.26	15.01	19	22.3	22.11	13.35
Dakshin Dinajpur	0	55.12	12.49	19	22.3	18.18	10.76
Maldah	10.7	16.86	-0.51	17.3	20.7	17.48	17.55
Murshidabad	12.3	18.73	15.36	15.1	16.8	13.07	6.26
Birbhum	13	15.01	11.93	18.8	19.1	19.36	12.78
Barddhaman	17.7	10.43	7.7	17.1	19.6	17.37	12.79
Nadia	15	15.66	10.92	14.3	15.6	12.61	7.77
North 24 Parganas	22.6	14.13	8.21	20	2.1	12.22	7.26
Hooghly	18.1	19.82	-0.36	19.1	18.9	6.33	10.67
Bankura	13.4	13.3	10.25	26.3	30.2	27.41	20
Purulia	9.9	13.3	14	32.3	39	37.22	27.4
Howrah	17	13.13	8.5	19.9	18.3	12.75	7.52
South 24 parganas	Na	19.13	11.67	20	27.9	20.16	11.95
Paschim Medinipur	Na	8.03	5.91	25.6	24.7	20.62	14.72
Purbo Medinipur	Na	Na	Na	25.6	24.7	20.62	8.95
Kolkata	9	5.85	6.71	10.1	9.8	6.12	3.68
West Bengal	16.3	13.08	10.82	20.2	21.2	17.34	11.2

Source: Census of India, 1981-2011

Notes: (i) 24thParaganas District was divided on 1st March, 1980 and Paschim Dinajpur District was divided into Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur on 1stApril, 1992. We have used combined data for Census1981 in respect of North and South 24 Paraganas. Similarly used combined 1991 data for both Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur. (ii) Medinipur District was divided into Purbo Medinipur and Paschim Medinipur on 1stJanuary, 2002.Because of this we have used combined data for Census 1991 and Census 2001.

It has been found that women's literacy in Purulia district was abysmally low in the pre-reforms period as 1981 census figures reveal. It was only 13.3 percent in 1981. The district has witnessed improvement over the time along with other districts in the state but it continues to retain the tag of the district with minimum literacy rate in West Bengal in 2011 with literacy rate of 50.5 per cent while women's literacy is 70.5 percent at the state level. The gender inequality as manifested in the literacy gap was maximum in 1981 at 20.2 percentage points at the state level that is during our study period. However, at the district level maximum gender gap in literacy was observed in Purulia at 32.3 percentage points. It may be interesting to note that this gender inequality increased in 1991 when the gender gap in literacy hiked to 39 percentage points because of uneven growth of literacy as between male and female population during 1981-91. Thereafter, the gap started to decline, albeit, slowly compared to other districts. In 2011, the gender gap in literacy in Purulia district is as high as 27.4 percent points which is more than double of the state

average and the reasons of which need to be probed deeply.

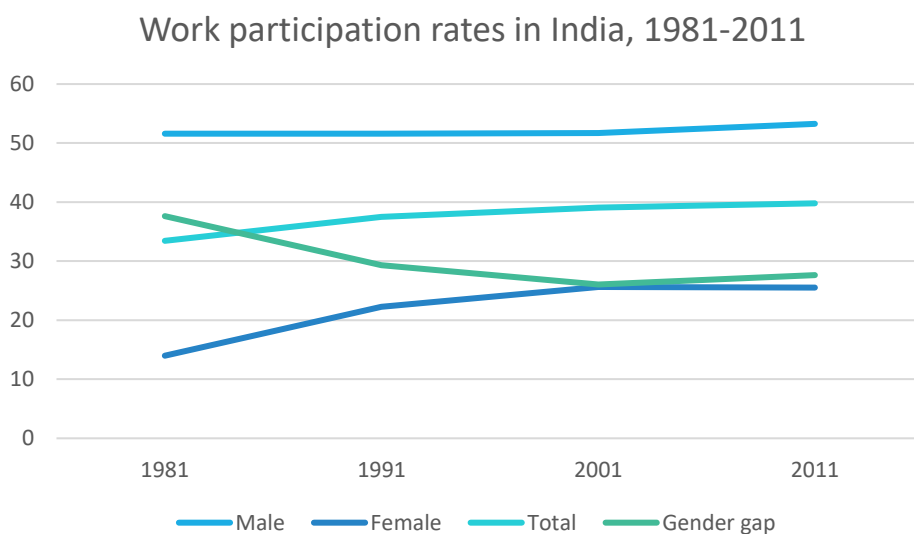
3. Changing Status of Women in Respect of Work Participation:

Work participation is one of the most important factors of development. Especially female work participation is a driver of growth and development. When a large portion of female population is directly included in economic activity, it turns out to be a significant development for the concerned economy (Goswami and Kumar, 2013). In this section, we will explore the changing status of women in respect of work participation in Purulia district in the context of West Bengal and India.

3.1 Women's Work Participation: National level:

There is always gender difference in work participation rates in India. The data reveal that in 1981 when male work participation rate was 51.62 per cent, it was only about 14 percent for the women showing a huge gender gap of about 38 percentage points (Figure-2). Over the years, the work participation by women has increased. But an important observation can be made about the fact that in the pre-reforms period, i.e., during 1981 to 1991 female work participation rates have increased from 13.99 percent to 22.3 percent, which is more than 8 percentage points increase. The decadal increase was less impressive thereafter. In fact, during the post reforms period from 1991 to 2011, the female work participation rates have increased by only 3.21 percentage points. Further, during 2001-2011, Women work participation rate has worsened marginally leading gender gap to increase (Figure-2).

Figure 2: Work Participation Rates in India, 1981-2011



Source: Based on Census of India 1981-2011

Overall, Figure-2 reveals prevalence of gender inequality in work participation. It may be noted here that women's higher work participation indicates their economic empowerment. Many studies have conclusively revealed this relationship. Therefore, existence of large inequality in work participation reveals poor economic status for the women leading to their truncated socio-economic empowerment. We could not visualize desired transition towards women's economic empowerment in the post-reforms period at the all-India level.

3.2 Women's Work Participation Scenario in 15 Major States:

Table-4 depicts work participation rates in major states in India during 1981-2011. Work participation rate for men is higher than the national average in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. In contrast, only Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh had higher Women's work participation rates in 1981. The average gender gap was about 38 percentage points. Punjab, Haryana, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh had very low women work participations in 1981. During 1981-91, most of the states witnessed impressive increase in the female work participation rates. However, during the post reforms period the increase in female work participation have been very slow.

As a result, we do not find secular decline of the gender gaps in work participation rates. In fact, in most of the states, gender gap has increased during 2001-2011.

Table-4: Work participation rate of 15 major states

State	1981		1991		2001		2011	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Andhra Pradesh	57.12	27.02	55.5	34.3	51.68	25.63	56.98	36.16
Assam	--	--	49.4	21.6	56.23	35.11	53.59	22.46
Bihar	49.19	9.06	47.9	14.9	47.37	18.84	46.47	19.07
Gujarat	52.19	11.03	53.6	26	54.87	27.91	57.16	23.38
Haryana	48.94	4.69	48.5	10.8	50.3	27.22	50.44	17.79
Karnataka	53.9	18.95	54.1	29.4	56.64	31.98	59	31.87
Kerala	41.04	12.77	47.6	15.8	51.5	33.21	52.73	18.23
Madhya Pradesh	53.52	22.35	52.3	32.7	56.23	35.11	53.56	32.64
Maharashtra	52.51	23.98	52.2	33.1	53.28	30.81	56	31.06
Orissa	54.38	10.7	53.8	20.8	52.53	24.66	56.11	27.16
Punjab	53.14	2.27	54.2	4.4	53.6	19.05	55.15	13.91
Rajasthan	49.92	9.32	49.3	27.4	49.95	33.49	51.47	35.12
Tamil Nadu	55.85	22.36	51.3	30.4	57.64	31.54	59.31	31.8
Uttar Pradesh	50.31	5.39	49.7	12.3	46.8	16.54	47.71	16.75
West Bengal	48.71	5.81	51.4	11.2	53.99	18.32	57.07	18.08
India	51.62	13.99	51.6	22.3	51.68	25.63	53.26	25.51

Source: Census of India, 1981-2011. Assam remained excluded in 1981 census.

Further, it may be noted that the work participation rates of both male and female labours in West Bengal were below the national level until 1991. However, in the post reforms period, male work participation rate surpassed the national rate while female labour participation rate continued to remain below the national average. Therefore, it may be argued that the status of women in West Bengal remained below the national level throughout the period of our study. Thus, the prevailing policies failed to enhance economic capability of the women in West Bengal. Looking through the prism of gender

equity, we find that prevailing gender gap in work participation is about 39 percentage points in 2011, just about 4 percentage points decline from 1981 figures of 42.9 percentage points, which is an insignificant rate of decline in forty years.

3.3. Work Participation: District-Level

In this section, we have presented data on work participation rates for both male and female workers across the districts of West Bengal during 1991-2011 (Table-5). It may be noted that in Kolkata, Paschim Medinipur Hooghly, Birbhun and Bankura districts male work participation rates are higher than the state average in 1991. While for the women workforce, Purulia, Darjeeling, Bankura, Maldah, Uttar Dinajpur and Birbhum districts have work participation rates higher than the state average. We have already noted that the female work participation rate is very low in West Bengal. Even in 2011, female work participation rate has been as low as 18.8 percent. It may be noted that almost all districts witnessed increase in work participation rate during the post reforms period. However, during 2001-2011, many districts have witnessed decline in female work participation rate and as a result, overall female work participation rate in West Bengal increased marginally from 18.3 percent to 18.8 percent during 2001-2011. However, during the post reforms period male work participation grew evenly.

Table-5: District wise work Participation rate, 1991-2011

District	1991		2001		2011	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Darjeeling	47.13	20.09	48	21.38	51.17	22.44
Jalpaiguri	50.62	15.64	52.27	23.5	55.03	22.31
Koch Bihar	53.57	9.21	54.91	22.22	58.24	20.67
Uttar Dinajpur	54.46	13.04	53.31	24.34	51.55	18.96
Dakshin Dinajpur	54.46	13.04	--	--	58.28	24.84
Maldah	51.51	16.77	52.55	28.29	52.96	23.3
Murshidabad	51.49	10.33	51.14	16.37	54.74	17.38
Birbhum	52.45	12.75	54.3	19.65	57.5	17.64
Bardhaman	50.1	9.01	53.53	16.03	57.83	16.48
Nadia	52	5.13	54.96	14.07	58.56	11.48
North 24 Parganas	50	5.4	53.01	11.55	57.53	12.81
Hooghly	52.31	8.05	56.5	16.16	60.88	16.24
Bankura	51.79	19.21	56.75	32.04	57.17	23.62
Purulia	51.24	34.61	52.31	36.21	53.16	31.36
Hawrah	51.47	3.73	55.85	9.19	59.91	13.69
South 24 parganas	48.8	6.2	51.82	11.83	56.46	14.24
Paschim Medinipur	51.9	17.5	54.5	22.28	58.43	25.87
Purbo Medinipur	51.9	17.5	54.5	22.28	57.65	15.99
Kolkata	53.86	6.91	58.06	12.84	59.93	17.91
West Bengal	51.4	11.3	54.23	18.03	57.07	18.08

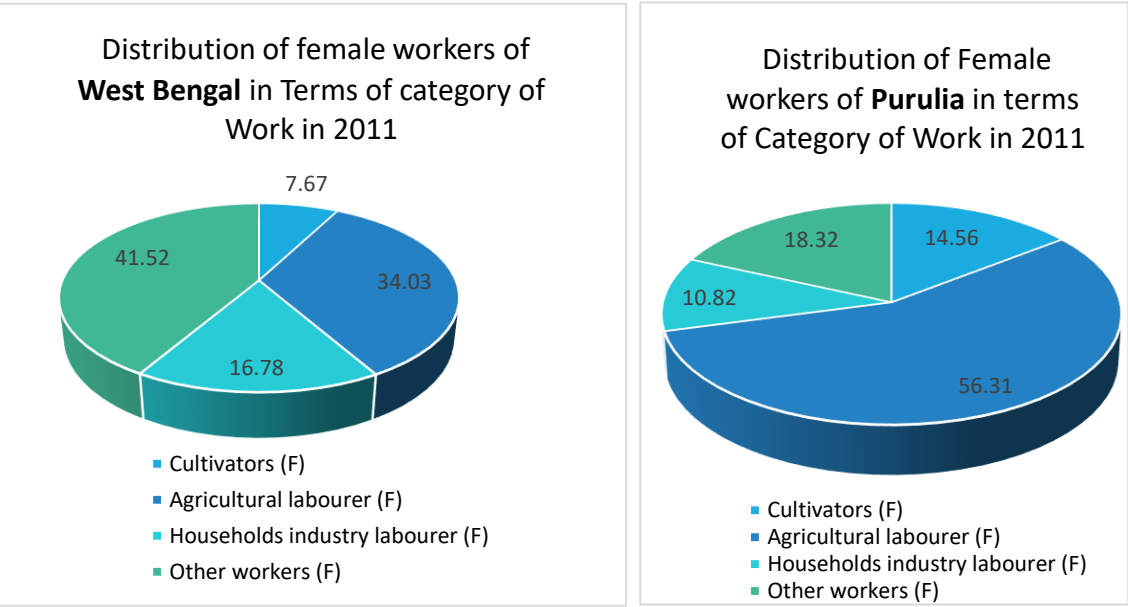
Sources: Census of India, 1991-2011

Note: i) District Paschim Dinajpur was divided into Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur on 1st, April, 1992. Because of this we have used combined data for census 1991.

ii) District Medinipur was divided into Purbo Medinipur and Paschim Medinipur on 1st January, 2002. Because of this we have used combined data for Census 1991 and census 2001

It may be noted that Purulia district stands apart amongst all the districts of West Bengal in terms of female work participation rates during the entire period followed by Bankura, Maldah and Paschim Medinipur. Female work participation rate is impressive in Purulia in West Bengal standard with 34.61 percent in 1991. However, this rate declined in 2011 to 31.36 percent after witnessing some increase in 2001 (Table-5). The reason for higher female work participation rate in Purulia may be found in prevalence of bidi workers in the district and unfavourable soil quality for agriculture requiring more family workers in cultivation related works. Therefore, gender gap in work participation is low in Purulia.

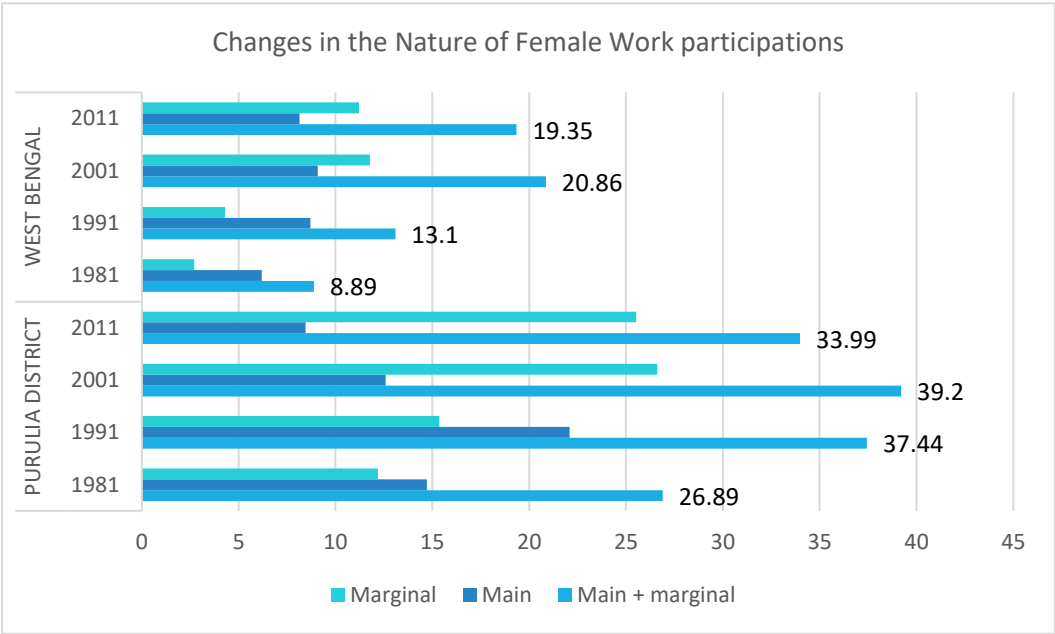
Figure 3: Category wise Distribution of Female workers in 2011



Source: Census 2011

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) included women’s economic empowerment as a key element of the process of gender empowerment. The female work participation is included in the definition of empowerment because economic earnings open avenues for increasing women’s capabilities and entitlements. The data on work participation of women do not allow us to conclude that women’s status in this regard has substantially improved. In West Bengal we have found that women’s work participation has been low so is the quality of employment as depicted in the pie diagrams (Figure 3). Out of the employed workers, more than one-third is agricultural labourers in the state. In Purulia, it is 56.31 percent. Agricultural labourers are most vulnerable section of workers in India and most of them live below the poverty line. Therefore, it may be concluded that relatively higher female work participation rate in Purulia does not reflect economic empowerment of female workers; rather, it is a reflection of distress living for them. This distress aspect is clearly visible when we trace the changes in the composition of female work participation during the entire period as shown in the following table. In 1981, the female work participation rate was 26.89 % of which 14.71% were involved in main work while 12.19% in marginal work. The female work participation rate increased by 10.55 percentage points of which increase in main work participation was 7.37 percentage points and increase in marginal work was little over 3 percentage points.

Figure-4: Changes in the Nature of Female Work participations in Purulia in Comparison with the State of West Bengal



Source: Census of India 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011

However, in the post reforms period, the picture had reversed. The female work participation rate in main work started declining in the post reforms period. It had declined to 12.59 % in 2001 from as high as 22.08 % in 1991 and declined further to 8.46 % in 2011. While during the entire period, female work participation rate in marginal work steadily increased from 15.36 % in 1991 to 26.61% in 2001 and thereafter settled at 25.53% in 2011. The marginalization of work has been a general feature at the state level in the post-reforms period. But, the marginalization of female work participation had been steepest in Purulia. Thus, the available secondary data reveal that the status of women in terms of work participation has worsened in the post reforms period (Figure-4).

4. Changing Status of Women in respect of Health

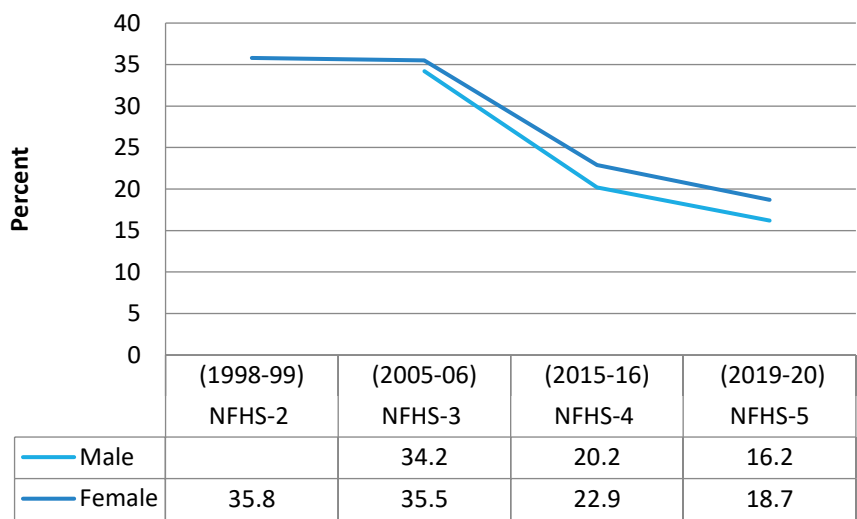
Health is another vital aspect of life along with education and income determining relative status and empowerment of any section of the population. In this section, we have dealt with the health status of women in the context of India, West Bengal and Purulia. We have already discussed that one of the important indicators of health status is the body mass index (BMI) of the population. The value of BMI less than 18.5 indicates ill health and malnutrition. Therefore, using this index we may study the health status of women and changes occurring over time.

4.1. Women’s Health Status: National level

We have presented data on percentage of male and female who’s BMI is less than 18.5 in India during NFHS-2 to NFHS-5 in Figure 2. It may be noted that BMI data for men are available only from NFHS-3 survey. It reveals that more than one-third female population in India suffered from malnutrition during 1998-99 (NFHS-2). It remained almost at the same level till 2005-06. Thereafter there has been impressive decline during 2005-06 to 2015-16. For the male population also similar trend is visible so far as their BMI is

concerned although males are better off compared to the females. The declining trend continues in 2019-20 (Figure 5)

Figure 5: Percentage of Males and Females with BMI less than 18.5 in India



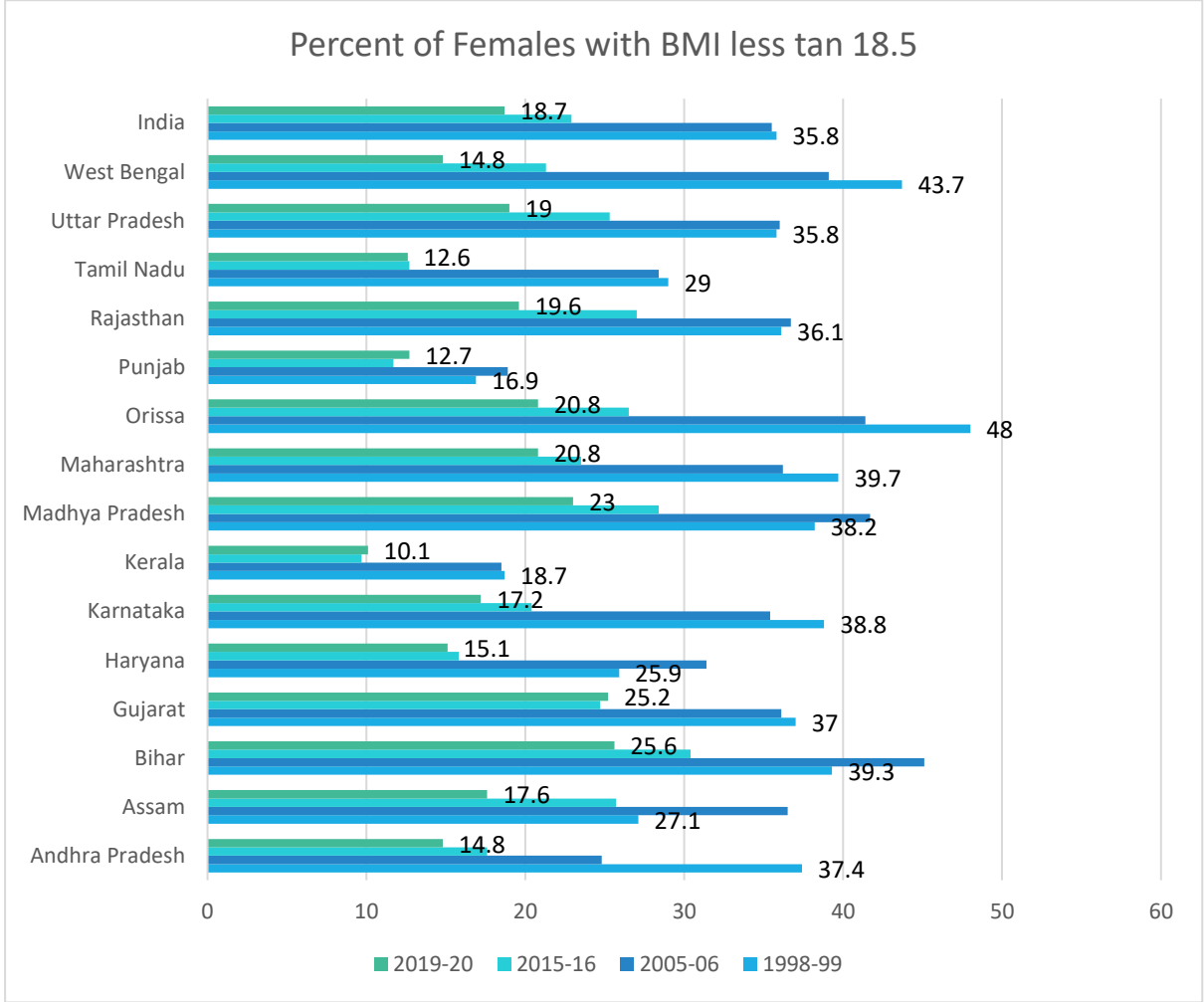
Sources: NFHS-2 (1998-99), NFHS-3(2005-2006), NFHS-4(2015-16), NFH-5 (2019-20)
NFHS-3 provided data for both men and women first time.

4.2 Women’s Health Status in 15 Major States:

Figure-6presents state level data on percentage females having BMI less than 18.5 for major Indian states during 1998-99 and 2019-20. It is clear that in 1998-99, i.e., during NFHS-2, there was high percentage of malnourished women in West Bengal with about 44 percent of women being malnourished (in terms of BMI less than 18.5) while at the all India level, this figure was about 36 percent. Orissa, Maharashtra, Bihar, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh were other major states having high percentage of malnourished women. Although there has been certain reversals, the percentage of malnourished women has declined thereafter both at the national and the state levels.NFHS data also reveal that barring a few exceptions proportion of malnourished females is greater than malnourished males over the entire period for which comparable data are available.

During 1998-2006, the percentage of malnourished women declined marginally at the national level (0.3 percentage point). While Andhra Pradesh (-12.6 percentage points), Orissa (-6.6 percentage points), West Bengal (-4.6 percentage points) and some other states had witnessed higher levels of decline in terms of BMI. But, some other states like Assam (+ 9.4 percentage points), Bihar (+5.8 percentage points), Haryana (+5.5 percentage points), Madhya Pradesh (+3.5 percentage points) and Punjab (+2 percentage points) witnessed worsening of women’s health status.

Figure-6: Percentage Females having BMI less than 18.5 during 1998-2020 in Major States in India



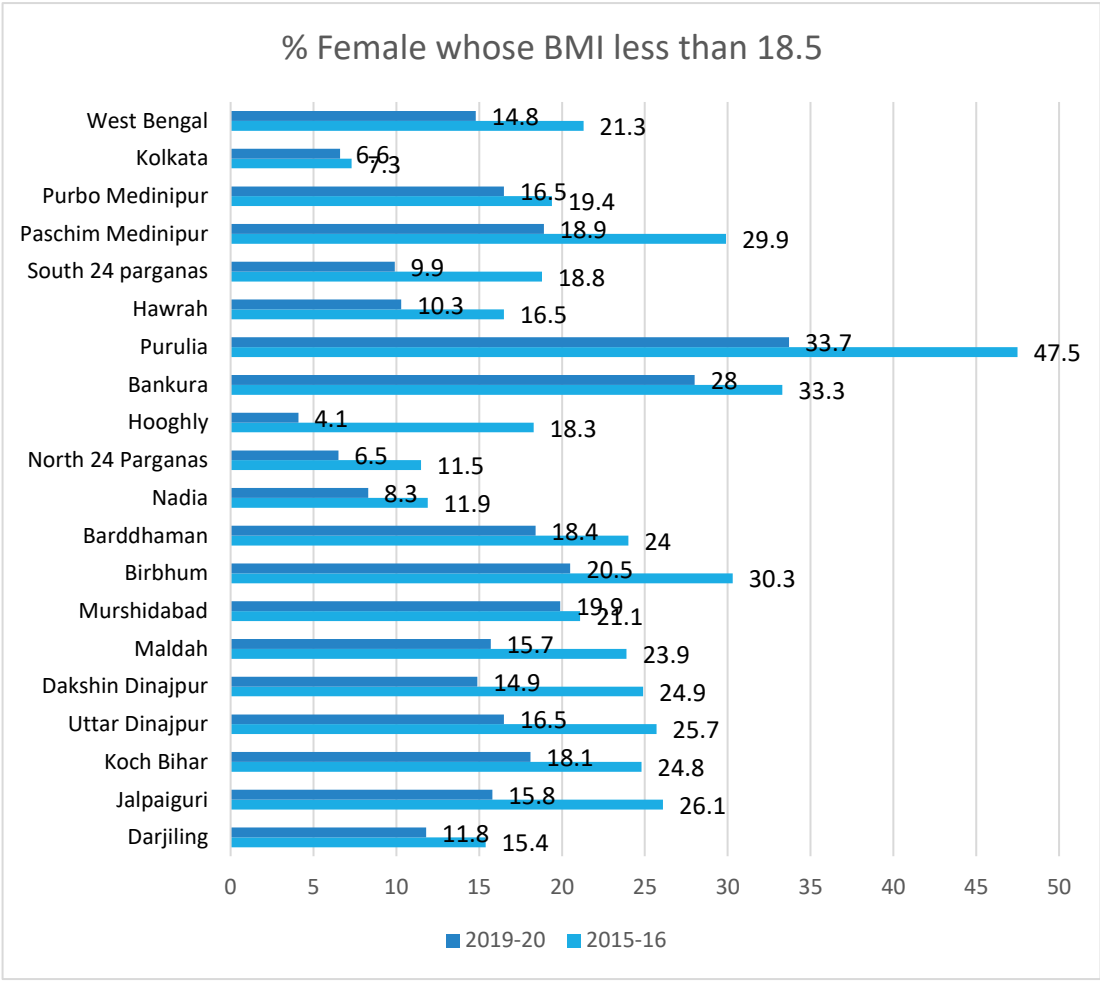
Sources: NFHS-2 (1998-99), NFHS-3(2005-6), NFHS-4(2015-16), NFH-5 (2019-20)
NFHS-3 provided dataforboth men and women first time.

However, during 2006-2020, health status of women has improved substantially across the states with 16.8 percent points declineat the all India level (Figure-6). West Bengal has witnessed steepest decline (24.3 percent points) followed by Orissa (20.6 percent points) and Bihar (19.5 percent points).

4.3 Women’s Health Status: District Level

Let us now focus on the health status of both men and women in different districts in West Bengal. The district level data on BMI is available only for 2015-16 for both males and females and for only females for 2019-20. In 2015-16, about 20 percent of male and 21.3 percent of females in West Bengal were malnourished. Surprisingly, almost half of the women (47.5 percent) in Purulia district were malnourished. Other districts having very poor women’s health status are Bankura (33.3),Paschim Medinipur (29.9%), Birbhum (30.3%) and Jalpaiguri (26.1%) (**Figure-7**).

Figure-7: Percentage of females whose BMI are less than 18.5 in the districts of West Bengal level during 2015-16 and 2019-20.



Source: NFHS-4(2015-16)&NFHS-5(2019-20) Note: NFHS-4 provided district level data for the first time.

If we investigate the gender disparity, we will again find Purulia district has the highest (23 percentage points) difference in terms of male and female suffering from malnutrition in West Bengal in 2015-16. In 2019-20, there has been overall improvement in the state with malnourished females reduced to 14.8 % from 21.3% whereas for the males it reduced from 19.9 to 15.1. Even after such improvements Purulia district stands apart where more than one-third females (33.7%) are malnourished in 2019-20.

5. Conclusion:

In this study, we have examined the impact of economic reforms on Women's Socio-economic Standing or their empowerment, in a Backward District of West Bengal. We have done this by examining the changing status of women in the post reforms period in the study area in respect of education, work participation and health. We have compared the changes in our study area vis-à-vis changes that occurred at the state level and at the national level. After detailed analysis, we have found the following:

Women’s literacy in Purulia district was very low in the pre-reforms period. The district has witnessed improvement over the time along with other districts in the state. However, it continues to remain as the worst performer in the state with a female literacy rate of 50.5 per cent in 2011 while it is 70.5 percent at the state level. The gender

inequality as manifested in the literacy gap remained maximum throughout the period in Purulia among all the districts in West Bengal. During the pre-reforms period, the gender gap in literacy was huge (more than 32 percent points in 1991) which started to decline slowly thereafter to reach still a very uncomfortable 27.4 percent points in 2011.

Women's economic empowerment is viewed as a key element of the process of gender empowerment as a whole and the female work participation is included in the definition of empowerment as economic earnings open up avenues for increasing women's capabilities and entitlements. The data on work participation of women do not reveal very satisfactory women's status in this regard. In West Bengal we have found that women's work participation have been low along with poor quality of employment. While at the state level about one-third employed women are agricultural labourers, in Purulia it is more than 56%. It is well known that the agricultural labourers are most vulnerable section of workers in India and most of them live below the poverty line. Therefore, it may be concluded that relatively higher female work participation rate in Purulia does not reflect economic empowerment of female workers; rather, it is a reflection of distress living for them. The changes in the composition of female work participation during the entire period also corroborate our findings. As such, in 1981, the female work participation rate was 26.89 % of which 14.71 % were involved in main work while 12.19 % in marginal work. The female work participation rate increased by 10.55 percentage points of which increase in main work participation was 7.37 percentage points and increase in marginal work was little over 3 percentage points during 1981-91.

However, in the post reforms period, the picture was reversed. The female work participation rate in main work started declining in the post reforms period. It had declined to 12.59 % in 2001 from as high as 22.08 % in 1991 and declined further to 8.46 % in 2011. While during the entire period, female work participation rate in marginal work steadily increased from 15.36 % in 1991 to 26.61% and 25.53% respectively in 2001 and 2011. The marginalization of work has been a general feature at the state level in the post-reforms period. But, the marginalization of female work participation had been highest in Purulia. Thus, the available secondary data reveal that the status of women in terms of work participation has worsened in the post reforms period.

We considered the Body Mass Indices (BMI) of women as indicators of female health status. We have found that in 2015-16, about 20 percent of male and 21.3 percent of females in West Bengal are malnourished. Surprisingly, almost half of the women (47.5 percent) in Purulia district are malnourished. In 2019-20, there has been overall improvement in the state with malnourished females reduced to 14.8 % and for the males it reduced to 15.1. Even after such improvements Purulia district stands apart where more than one-third females (33.7%) are malnourished in 2019-20. Further, the gender disparity in terms of health status is also highest in Purulia.

Therefore, available data confirm that women in Purulia remain as vulnerable in the post-reforms period as before and all efforts in achieving Millennium Development Goals or Sustainable Development Goals pertaining to women's empowerment bypassed the backward regions of the country.

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About Author: Apurba Kumar Chattopadhyay, Professor, Department of Economics & Politics, Visva-Bharati & Kaberi Pal, State Aided College Teacher, Department of Commerce Trivenidevi Bhalotia College, Raniganj, Paschim Bardhaman.